Irina Paert. *Spiritual Elders. Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. Bibliography. Index. Xiii + 286 pp. $ 43.00 (hardcover)

Spiritual eldership is a unique and characteristic phenomenon of Eastern Christianity that is typically rooted in its ascetic and monastic tradition. In its original definition, it is a form of spiritual mentorship that is linked to the mystical prayer practice of *hesychasm*. Especially in Russia, elders or *startsy* became popular symbols of Orthodox spirituality, whose charisma transcended the monastic realm and appealed to a growing group of lay believers. Paert's book provides an exhaustive and impressively documented account – she did her research in central and provincial archives in Russia, Estonia and Finland – of Russian eldership, and its significance in Russian religion and culture. Studying eldership in medieval, imperial, soviet and post-soviet Russia, Paert shows that even though most of the *startsy* came from the clergy, their activities and authority bore a strong non-institutional and non-hierarchical character, which often brought them into conflict with representatives of the ecclesiastical establishment.

The monograph is divided into 6 chapters. Chapter 1 offers a brief overview of the historical background of Russian *starchestvo*: from its origins in early Christian desert monasticism through the summit of Byzantine Hesychasm in the 14th century, its introduction in medieval Russia and finally its revival by Paisii Velichovskii at the end of the 18th century. Chapter 2 studies the gradual comeback of *starchestvo* in the 18th century against the background of the Petrine church reforms and the anti-monastic reforms by Catherine the Great. This period in the Russian church, marked by secularization and rationalization, proved detrimental to Russia's spiritual life: many monasteries were closed or turned into state hospitals or asylums and the monks who remained did no longer fulfill their spiritual role. That is why, Paert shows, the renaissance of eldership was not instigated in the official

monasteries, but emerged in a non-institutional environment, e.g. in the milieus of Old Believers, in remote hermitages in the Siberian forests or in female communities. *Starchestvo* rose in a sphere of opposition to the state-controlled church and instigated a breeze of reform that appealed to clergymen and laity alike. In chapter 3, Paert describes how political and ideological circumstances in the first part of the 19th century had an unexpected hand in the institutionalization of eldership. The atmosphere of religious liberalization, of resistance to the trend of rationalism and modernism associated with the French Revolution, and of Romantic ideas of national identity, created a context in which some powerful, reformist prelates openly supported the elders and took measures to give them a more official, but still relatively autonomous status within the church. The renowned hermitage of Optina Pustyn', for example, home of the charismatic *starcy* Leonid, Makarii and Amvrosii, flourished under the auspices of bishop Filaret (Amfiteatrov) and metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov). Also, *starchestvo* benefited from the involvement of prominent Slavophile thinkers, like Ivan Kireevskii, and the financial aid from the nobility. As a result, the link between the elders and the world was established. However, a large part of the church dignitaries felt increasingly threatened by the autonomous position and growing popularity of the elders, as a result of which "the tensions between charisma and institution remained unresolved" (102). Chapter 4 examines how in the second half of the 19th century the elders – still growing in numbers – stepped more actively into the public sphere and profiled themselves as spiritual counselors for all social groups in Russian society. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and other socio-economic changes that mark 19th century Russia, the peasantry found itself in a state of transition. Against the background of the lack of pastoral care among many of the rural priests, they clung to the elders for spiritual and moral advice in daily and more special matters. One of the most famous elders, who gained a national status as "moral and spiritual guide of the Russian *narod*" (127) was the elder Amvrosii of Optina, who was also a key

figure for the so-called "Optina-intelligentsia", i.e. renowned intellectuals who contributed to the transition of *starchestvo* in Russian culture (the most important of them being Dostoevskii, who deliberately created a fictional elder, Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*). Still, despite – and most likely because of – the elders' rising fame among the Russian people, their position in the official church remained controversial and problematic. Chapter 5 examines the appropriation of elderhood in late imperial Russia. The crisis in which the Russian church found itself around the turn of the 1900s led to a further increase of the elders' popularity. In spite of the strained relations with the church authorities, *starchestvo* was by a growing group of reformist clerics embraced as a means to revitalize Russian Orthodoxy. At the same time, relations with the laity were intensified, not only with the common people, but also with the political elite, who used elders "as symbols of the unity between the tsar and the people" (164). Nicholas II's support in the canonization of Serafim of Sarov shows how elderhood was brought into play to reestablish relations with the lower classes. Chapter 6 looks at the legacy of the elders in the period after the 1917 revolutions up to now (2000). Paert describes how in the Soviet era elderhood even further transcended the monastic realm and took the form of political dissent. Attention is drawn to the role of the elders in the Russian *diaspora* and the revival of *starchestvo* in post-Soviet Russia.

Paert's book offers an impressive and engaging study of Russian eldership, its role in the history of Russian Orthodoxy and its impact on Russian culture and society. It gives a well-documented insight into this controversial phenomenon in the Russian church and describes persuasively how it rose above the boundaries of monastic practice and became a "moral and spiritual compass" (105) for the Russian people. The book is a fascinating read for anyone interested in the history of Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian (cultural) history and religious studies.

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